

MD

MEDICAL NEWSMAGAZINE

VOL. 23 NO. 12 DECEMBER, 1979

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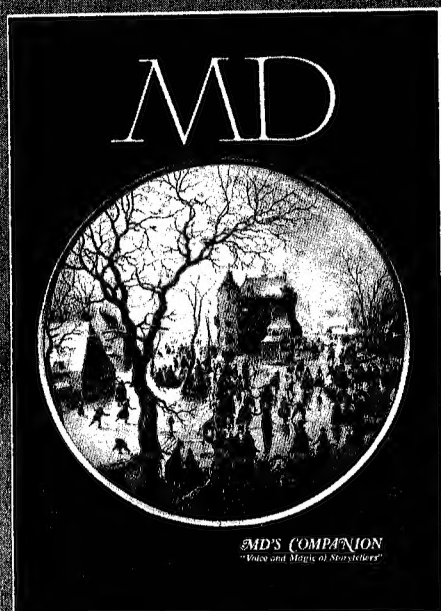
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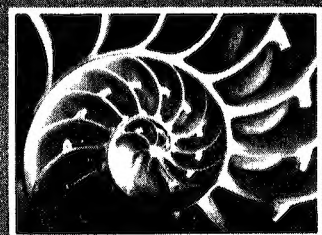
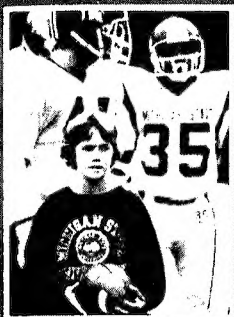


A Winter Scene with Skaters near a Castle, ca. 1610, by Hendrick Avercamp (1585-1634), evokes the joyous Christmas season in a composition that combines genre painting with the notion of pure landscape. The Trustees of the National Gallery, London. Photograph by John Webb, FRPS.

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MD (USPS 333-340) is published monthly by MD Publications, Inc., 30 East 30th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022. Verna Sabella, President, 30 East 30th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022; Alice Chiao, Vice-President, 30 East 30th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022. © Copyright 1979 by MD Publications, Inc. Controlled circulation postage paid at Hollywood, Florida. Matter appearing in MD is covered by copyright and all rights are reserved. Permission to reproduce articles in whole or in part must be obtained in writing from MD Publications, Inc. Price \$2.50 per copy. Subscription price \$20.00 a year (\$25.00 Canada and foreign). Printed in U.S.A.

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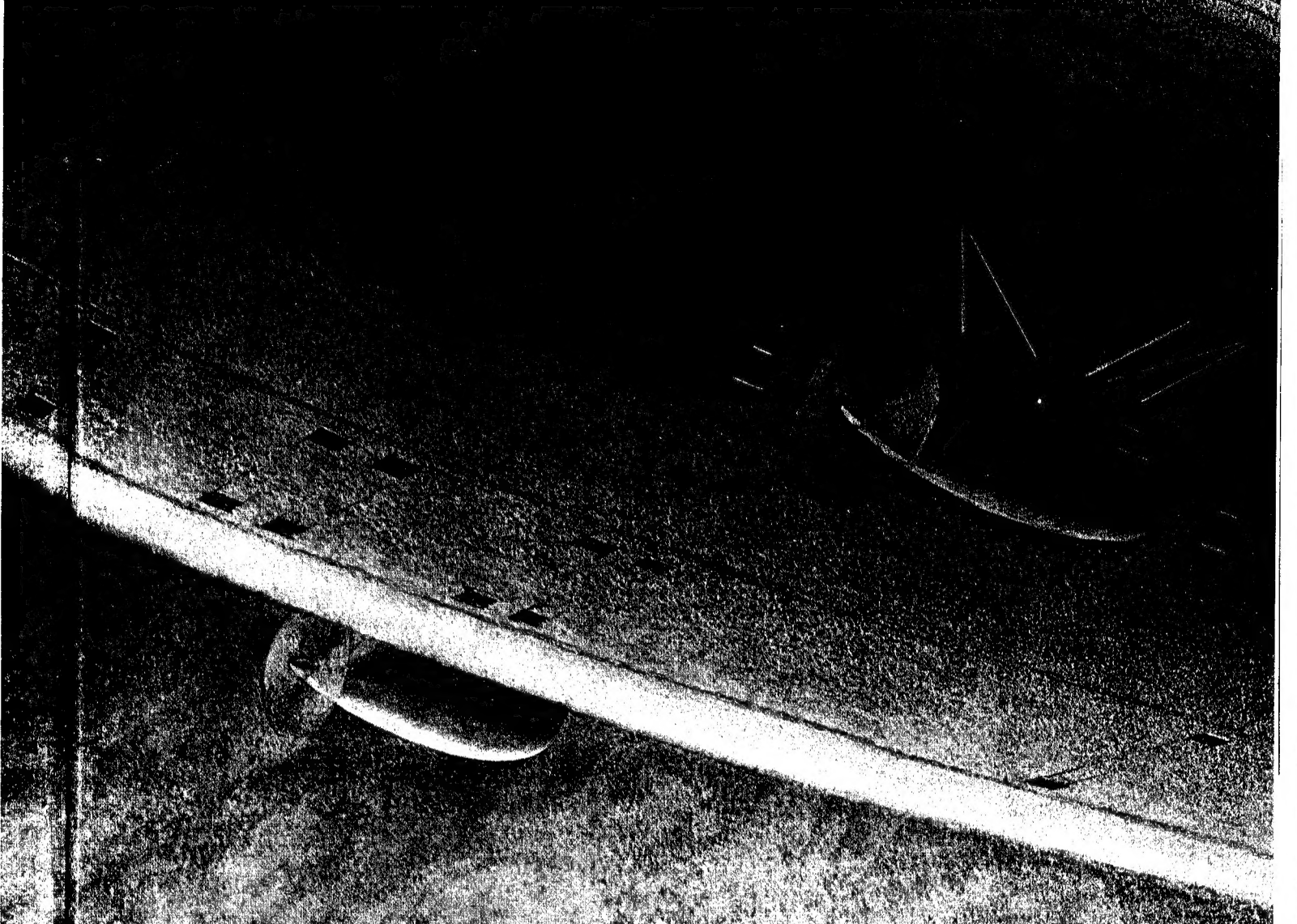
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Merrell Cason

FOCAL POINT

BY JACK RITCHIE

One of the most popular short-fiction writers, Jack Ritchie has enthralled mystery fans for years with his award-winning short stories. Adaptations of his work seen on television and in the cinema prove the excellence of his work, which has been featured in various periodicals, journals, and collections, as well as selected for the "Best Detective Stories of the Year."



Hugo still remained doubtful about the entire project. "Professor, I don't think it's wise to tamper with the past."

"Nonsense," I said. "Can't you envision all the errors of history that can be corrected by a judicious word here and there to the right person?"

Hugo was, after all, simply a laboratory technician here at the university. Loyal and hardworking, it is true, but he obviously did not have the sweep and imagination of my own mind.

"So far I have transported one paperweight and one cat into the past," I said. "It is now time for a human being to make the journey."

"But you weren't able to bring the cat back."

"A small error on my part," I admitted. "I should have tied the miserable creature to a stake or something. Apparently it wandered out of the critical area."

That is the essence of my time machine. Area control. I transport an area and all that it contains. At present, I am able to manipulate a space with

an area that is four feet square and seven feet high.

"How do we really *know* that the paperweight and the cat were transported into the past?" Hugo asked. "They just disappeared from view and only the paperweight returned."

"Exactly, Hugo. And that is precisely why it is now time for me to see for myself."

"But suppose that the captain of the *Titanic* won't listen to you?"

"Listening, as such, is not required. I will simply get his attention—or that of the officer on the bridge—and point out the iceberg while it is still miles away and can be easily avoided. On the night of April 14, 1912, the sea was calm and the air cold and clear."

"But what if, no matter what you do, the *Titanic* still strikes the iceberg?"

I shrugged. "Then so be it. In that case I will remain aboard only long enough to establish once and for all whether the ship's band did or did not play *Nearer My God to Thee* and then transport my-

self back here without so much as getting my feet wet."

My time machine is portable and about the size of an old-fashioned box camera. Originally I had anticipated a quite stationary instrument approximately the size of a console organ; however, as my work progressed and I was able to utilize miniaturized circuits and transistors to the maximum, I found that I could condense the machine to its present size. As a result I have also been able to reduce my power pack from 220 volts alternating current to the present three volts direct current, which is supplied by two size D flashlight batteries. I am, as a consequence, now able to remain either outside of the area to be transported, or remain within it.

The laboratory phone rang and I answered it. My wife, Beatrice, was on the line.

I sighed and held the receiver some six inches from my ear. "Yes, dear?"

"Henry," she snapped. "What the hell did you do with the cat?"

"Cat?" I said. "What cat?"

"You know damn well what cat. Albert isn't anywhere in the house. You *did* take him for a walk this morning before you left for the university, didn't you?"

"Yes, dear." Beatrice sleeps until ten and it has become my duty to walk the silly animal. Frankly, it is embarrassing. I am the only person I know who walks a cat on a leash.

"And you *did* bring Albert back, didn't you?"

"Of course, dear." Technically I was not lying. I did bring Albert back, but then I put him into my automobile. As far as I knew, at this moment Albert was wandering about somewhere in sixteenth-century Stratford-on-Avon.

"Henry," Beatrice said ominously, "Mrs. Pringle says that she *saw* you put Albert into your car this morning and drive off."

"Beatrice," I said indignantly, "who are you going to believe? Me or Mrs. Pringle?"

"Mrs. Pringle. When you come home tonight, Henry, you'd better have Albert with you. Do you understand?"

I hung up and wiped my forehead. Did Isaac Newton have to contend with these domestic irritations? Edison? Einstein?

There was a knock at the laboratory door. I unlocked it and peered out.

It was Penelope Mullins, a teacher's assistant under my direction in the Physics Department.

She colored shyly as she spoke to me. "Professor Billings, I have corrected the term papers you gave me. If there are any questions at all about my grad-

ing, I would be glad to explain what I have done. I will be free after my two o'clock class."

I find that I too color a bit when we speak to each other. Miss Mullins is rather small, with violet eyes, a pleasantly soft voice, and assembled together without fault. In short, she is the diametric opposite of big what's-her-name.

"Certainly, Miss Mullins," I said. "I am a stickler for precise and accurate grading. I'll see you in my office at three."

She walked back down the hall and, at the corner, she looked back, blushed again, and disappeared from view.

I let my own blush diminish, then closed and locked the door. I hooked the sling of my time machine over my shoulder and moved to a clear space in the center of the laboratory.

"Well, Hugo," I said, "this is it. The Moment of Truth."

Hugo nodded. "Good luck, Professor."

I adjusted the time dials to two hours before midnight, April 14, 1912. That would give me an hour and a half to convince the captain to change the course of the *Titanic* ever so slightly so as to avoid the iceberg. I turned the finder rheostat to a point some 1,300 miles east of New York and switched on the homing device. It would put me directly aboard the *Titanic* rather than embarrassingly upon the sea itself.

I hesitated a moment and then resolutely pushed the red starter button.

There was an instant roaring in my ears and my consciousness departed rapidly in a series of convoluting swirls and then complete blackness.

As my senses slowly returned, I opened my eyes and found myself sitting on a chair. I appeared to be alone in a medium-sized cabin without portholes. It contained half a dozen slightly structured chairs and several small tables with small stacks of stationery and envelopes upon them. Across the cabin a bookcase containing perhaps two hundred volumes and some magazines was attached to the wall.

I found my heart beating rapidly. I had done it! I had boarded the *Titanic* and I was now in what was apparently a reading and writing room for the passengers. I sat where I was for nearly five minutes savoring the triumph of the moment.

Then I rose. It was now time to seek out the captain and accomplish my mission.

I went to the only door—or hatchway, as I suppose one would call it aboard ship—and opened it.

Directly in front of me and extending some dis-

tance to my right there were a number of windows, waist-high, and slanting outward. It was daylight and I could see clouds.

Daylight? I frowned. Evidently I had boarded the *Titanic* a bit earlier than I had planned. No matter. It would give me more time to warn the captain of the impending danger.

I stepped out onto what appeared to be a promenade deck with the windows constituting one of its sides. Actually it seemed to be quite a *short* promenade. A dozen passengers stood or sat at the windows gazing out.

I joined them. Ah, yes, there it was. The sea. Below me. Considerably below me. I had had no idea that the *Titanic* was so tall. The water actually seemed to be hundreds of feet below me.

I studied the passengers at the windows. All of them were well dressed and obviously in first class. I listened to them and could make out some English, but most of them seemed to be speaking German. I frowned again. I had been under the impression that the first-class passengers on the *Titanic* had been overwhelmingly English and American.

I shrugged and moved down the promenade. Immediately on my right hand—separated by a waist-high rail from the promenade—a lounge area contained a number of reclining chairs that were occupied by passengers. I noticed that the furniture here too seemed to be framed of aluminum.

There seemed to be something a fraction odd about the lounge, though I couldn't quite put my finger on it, except that I had the feeling that the passengers were *not* doing something one would normally expect people in lounges to do.

I reached a blank wall ending the promenade and turned through a door at my right. A pair of stairs, again to my right, led downward, but I elected to go on to another door that lay directly ahead.

Opening it, I found more windows identical to the ones I had just left. It was another promenade, except that this time, instead of a lounge to one side of it, there was a dining area with a number of tables at which passengers were being served a meal.

I went to the windows and looked out and down again. Damn it, the sea must be at least eight hundred feet below.

I scratched my head. I had gone from a promenade deck on one side of the ship to a promenade deck on the other. Yet how far had I walked to accomplish this? Less than a hundred feet. Perhaps eighty. Surely the *Titanic* must be wider than that.

I retraced my steps to the room in which I had found myself on the ship originally and went to one of the writing tables. I picked up a sheet of the sta-

tionery that was there and stared at the heading.

I was aboard the *Hindenburg*!

I closed my eyes. What had gone wrong with my time machine? I was positive of my theory and my construction. The batteries? My power pack? Obviously the batteries had been past their prime when I bought them. I would certainly have to replace them at the earliest opportunity.

I sat down. So I was aboard the dirigible *Hindenburg*? I should have guessed it. The sea so far below. The aluminum furniture to conserve weight. The nonsmoking in the lounge. One simply does not smoke aboard a dirigible held aloft by hydrogen.

Hydrogen?

Hadn't the *Hindenburg* met its demise when it burst into flame while being moored at Lakehurst, New Jersey, in 1937?

I experienced a momentary acceleration of my heart beat, but then controlled myself.

The *Hindenburg* was still safely out at sea. There should be enough power remaining in my batteries to at least transport myself out of the danger area before the disaster—preferably to some point on land where I could purchase fresh batteries.

I pondered. What had really caused the destruction of the *Hindenburg*? I remembered some of the theories. Static electricity. St. Elmo's fire. An incendiary bullet fired into the ship's hull from the ground. A bomb placed aboard the ship.

I rubbed my jaw. There was nothing I could do about the static electricity, the St. Elmo's fire, or the incendiary bullet, but what about the bomb? If such a device had been concealed aboard the *Hindenburg*, I could certainly warn the captain about it, couldn't I? A search could be made of the ship. As I remembered it from only newsreels, the *Hindenburg* had first burst into flames at a point on top of the ship, near the tail. The bomb ought to be somewhere up there. *If* there was a bomb, of course.

The hatchway opened and a uniformed crew member carrying a clipboard, stepped inside.

I nodded a greeting. "When are we due to dock at Lakehurst?"

He spoke with a German accent. "Six o'clock, sir. Two hours from now." He regarded me dubiously. "What is your name, sir?"

"Billings," I said. "Professor Billings."

He consulted his clipboard. "Sir, I do not see your name on the passenger list. When you appeared a few moments ago on the port promenade, I realized that I had not seen you once during the entire voyage. Are you a stowaway?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

He frowned. "I must consult with the captain."

"Good," I said. "He's just the man I want to see."

"You shall, sir. Please remain in this room. He will come to you."

He returned ten minutes later with the captain.

The captain regarded me sternly. "I understand that you are a stowaway."

I nodded. "However that is of no importance at the moment. Captain, I believe that there is a strong possibility that there is a time bomb aboard your ship. Specifically, it should be somewhere toward the rear of this vessel, near the top at the tail."

The captain and the steward exchanged quick glances and then he turned to me again. "Why do you say that there is a bomb on my ship? Did you place it there yourself?"

"Of course not."

"Then how do you know that it is there?"

"I didn't say positively that it is there. I just said that there is a *possibility* that there is a bomb aboard this ship. And *if* there is a bomb aboard, it is scheduled to go off in less than two hours."

The captain made a command decision. "Very well. I do not believe that there is a bomb on my ship; however, we will conduct the search for the simple reason that I cannot ignore the possibility that there is. In the meantime, you will remain here." He turned to the steward. "Rudolph, you will remain here and keep an eye on the stowaway."

After the captain left, Rudolph took a chair near the hatchway. While we waited, I tried some small talk, but either Rudolph's English was limited or he simply did not care for conversation.

Perhaps an hour passed before the captain returned, accompanied by two crew members dressed in coveralls and wearing rubber-soled shoes.

"Well," I said, "Did you find the bomb?"

"No," the captain said curtly. "We did not find any bomb."

"You searched thoroughly?"

"We searched thoroughly. The entire ship, not just the area you mentioned. There is no bomb anywhere aboard the *Hindenburg*. I am certain of that."

I gave that thought. Apparently it hadn't been a bomb which caused the demise of the *Hindenburg* after all. So that left the St. Elmo's fire, the static electricity, the incendiary bullet, or something else, whatever that something else might be.

The captain spoke coldly. "I would like you to explain to me how you got aboard this ship and why you sought to perpetrate this bomb hoax."

"Captain," I said. "This ship is doomed. As you approach the mooring mast at Lakehurst, the *Hindenburg* will suddenly burst into flame. I really don't know what you can do to prevent this except pos-

sibly by not docking at all. My advice to you is to just turn around and go back to Germany."

They looked at each other and I distinctly heard one of the crewmen mutter. "Er ist verrückt."

The captain smiled tolerantly. "How do you predict that the *Hindenburg* will burst into flames? Are you able to look into the future?"

"Actually I am looking into the past. I come from the year 1979 and so I *know* what is going to happen to the *Hindenburg* if something isn't done to prevent it."

The captain regarded me with an amusement that the others seemed to share. "You came here from the future? How did you accomplish this feat? With some kind of time machine?"

"Exactly. Actually I had intended to board the *Titanic*, but my power pack failed to function properly." I pulled back a slide on the side of my time machine to reveal the two batteries. "I was wondering if you might have some fresh replacements aboard?"

They all seemed to pale a bit and the captain looked quickly at Rudolph. "I thought that was just a camera. You don't suppose that box is actually the b..."

Rudolph swallowed and said nothing.

The captain manufactured a smile and his voice was strangely soothing. "Ah, you need fresh batteries for your time machine? Hm? But of course. We will provide you with fresh batteries, won't we, Rudolph?"

Rudolph licked his lips. "But certainly. We have batteries which we guarantee are *absolutely* fresh."

The captain nodded. "Now, sir, if you will carefully... v-e-r-y carefully disconnect and remove those batteries from your bo... from your time machine, we will get you the new fresh strong batteries immediately."

They seemed to hold their breaths as I removed the batteries and handed them to the captain.

At his signal, the two crewmen leaped upon me, and despite my struggles, relieved me of my time machine.

"See here," I protested, "I have patents pending."

But they ignored me and poured over the workings of my time machine. The captain consulted with one of the men. "Well, Schneider, you are the electrician's mate, what do you make of this?"

Schneider shook his head. "It is like nothing I have ever seen before. I do not know what it does—if it does anything, but I can definitely say that it is not a bomb. There is no dynamite or other explosive inside. It is a hoax of some kind."

I brushed wrinkles from my suit. "Now that you

have satisfied your curiosity, I'll thank you to return my machine."

The captain and the crew members talked it over among themselves, then the captain shrugged and gave me back my time machine.

"And the batteries, if you please," I added coldly.

The captain shook his head. "You may not have the batteries. It is forbidden to bring aboard the *Hindenburg* any object which is capable of creating a spark. I am confiscating the batteries."

"Now just one moment," I said, my voice rising. "Without those batteries I'm stranded on this ship."

But the captain remained adamant about returning my batteries. He and the two crew men departed, leaving me once again alone with Rudolph, who had been delegated to guard me until the mooring.

I sighed. "When will this ship dock?"

Rudolph glanced at his watch. "In thirty minutes. Six P.M."

I set my watch to 5:30 and wound it. What did I really know about the *Hindenburg* disaster? I searched the corners of my mind for loose items. As I remembered it, the *Hindenburg* had had approximately one hundred souls aboard. Half of them had survived.

I wiped my forehead with my handkerchief. In other words, I had a fifty-fifty chance of surviving—or dying—depending upon one's point of view.

Had the survivors come from any particular section of the ship? The nose? The tail? The passenger quarters? The command gondola under the ship?

I didn't know.

I could be sitting in the very portion of the ship where the possibility of survival was absolutely nil. What good would the over-all statistics do me if I were trapped in this room? I should at least be in a relatively open place where my chances of survival would be much better.

I spoke to Rudolph. "I suppose that the moment we land, I will be turned over to the authorities?"

Rudolph nodded. "Yes."

I sighed. "What a pity. It is my very admiration for this great ship that prompted me to stowaway. Unfortunately I have not really seen much of the *Hindenburg* except my hiding place. You don't suppose that I could just wander about a bit? As you can see, I am perfectly harmless."

Rudolph shook his head. "No."

I let a minute elapse and then took out my wallet. Rudolph displayed some interest as I counted my money.

I had forty-two dollars in bills. Not exactly a munificent sum for the year 1979, but in 1937 it

must represent considerable purchasing power. I put the bills on the small table beside me and then sauntered to the bookcase. I scanned the volumes on the shelves. "I am awed by this gigantic ship. But, of course, it could not take to the air without the services of a dedicated, hardworking, intelligent crew. What a pity that I cannot see more of this magnificent flying machine."

When I turned, the money had disappeared from the table.

Rudolph stroked his chin. "You do not seem dangerous, but, of course, I cannot let you wander about the ship alone. I will have to go with you."

We left the room and Rudolph assumed the role of a tour guide. "Everything is contained within the hull of the ship itself except for the command and motor gondolas attached to the outside." We went down a flight of stairs. "And this is the lower walkway which runs along the bottom of the ship."

I found myself staring at a fantastic complex of arches and struts and wires inside the monstrous hangar-like belly of the *Hindenburg*. The sun shone through the fabric exterior of the ship, outlining the girders and struts and the crisscrossing rings of the huge dirigible.

As we moved along the walkway, Rudolph pointed out the various parts of the ship—the freight rooms, the crew's quarters, the fuel tanks spaced through the ship, and the huge hydrogen bags, each surrounded by a netting of line and separated from the next by cotton partitions.

The walkway arched up in a slow curve to the rear of the ship where the vertical fin and the tail intersected. Rudolph led me to one of the tail fin's windows.

I looked down and saw land and houses. We seemed to be almost standing still. I quickly consulted my watch. It was almost six o'clock. We were about to moor the ship.

I felt a trace of panic. Was this really the best part of the ship to be in at this time? After all, the fire would break out almost directly above us. Wouldn't I have a better chance of survival forward? Should I brush past Rudolph and rush back to somewhere in the center of the ship?

Rudolph pointed to a crewman operating an electric winch. "Through those holes we release the aft spider lines. The spider line is a steel cable of about 60 feet and spliced into its end are a number of manila lines with wooden handles at their tips for the ground crew to grasp below and help guide the ship into the mooring tower."

I stared at the opening through which the line was being winched. The ground seemed only a hun-

dred feet under us. The ship would burst into flames at any second.

And then I blinked at a desperate thought. Was the hatch through which the landing lines were being lowered wide enough for me to squeeze through, slide down those ropes, and get to the ground before the *Hindenburg* met its doom? At any rate, I could gain a few seconds, and that might mean the difference between life and death.

I leaped to the opening, grasped the steel cable, and eeled my way through the narrow hole. I saw the astonished look on Rudolph's face and heard him shout and reach for me just as I popped through the opening and out of the ship.

My swift descent created enough friction on the steel cable to burn my hands and as my feet hit the point of the wire where it was spliced to the manila spider lines, I lost my grip and spun off into the air. There seemed to be a tremendous explosion and then total darkness.

I opened my eyes and stared at a ceiling. A white ceiling.

I lowered my eyes and saw a foot in a plaster cast. It was my left foot and I lay on a bed. A hospital bed.

I could feel no pain, just a certain feeling of confinement and restriction. I raised my arms. Both of my hands were bandaged. I moved my right leg. It seemed to function properly. There seemed to be a number of bandages about my chest and head.

But I experienced a feeling of elation. I had survived the *Hindenburg* disaster. A bit worse for the wear, it is true, but alive. Still alive.

What had happened to Rudolph, I wondered. Had he too come out alive?

I noticed a push button next to the bed and pressed it.

Eventually a nurse appeared. "Ah," she said, "You are awake."

"Of course," I said. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Since last night."

"And just what exactly is the damage to my body?"

"You have a broken left foot, second degree burns on your hands, several broken ribs, and a concussion. But all in all, you were quite lucky."

I curbed my own personal exuberance and became properly solemn. "It was a great tragedy. A great tragedy."

"What was a great tragedy?"

"The *Hindenburg*," I said. "Bursting into flames like that and all those people getting killed."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Was it possible that she hadn't heard? "My dear woman," I said, "I don't know where you have been, but history was made yesterday. On May 6, 1937, the *Hindenburg* was destroyed by fire as it was being moored at Lakehurst, New Jersey, and approximately fifty people met their deaths."

She regarded me clinically. "You haven't fully recovered from that concussion."

"Just one moment," I said. "This is May 7, 1937, isn't it?"

"No sir, This is September 9, 1936."

My mouth dropped. September, 1936? It was incredible, but I had boarded the *Hindenburg* some eight months before the great disaster!

And what about my time machine? Had it been smashed in the fall? "Nurse," I said. "When I was brought here, was there a small box strapped to my shoulder?"

"No, sir."

My heart sank. It was probably in a thousand fragments scattered about the Lakehurst field. Was I trapped in this time zone? It would be next to impossible for me to duplicate my machine in this decade. After all, quite a number of its components hadn't been invented, much less manufactured.

The nurse spoke again. "One of the crew members from the *Hindenburg* came here when you were still unconscious and left a small box. He said that when he tried to stop you from jumping, you slipped out of his grasp, but the strap and box came off your shoulder. He said you seemed to value it, so he thought he'd bring it here. Is that what you mean?" She went to a white metal cabinet beside my bed and brought me my time machine.

I grasped it eagerly and examined its interior. Everything seemed to be in order. "Nurse," I said, "I would like two fresh flashlight batteries."

She studied me skeptically. "What for?"

"Never mind. Just bring me the batteries."

"Where would I get flashlight batteries? I'm on duty and can't run off to some store."

"Try the hospital's maintenance department. They're bound to have some batteries."

She sighed and left the room.

Half an hour passed and I was afraid that she had decided to ignore my request, but then she reappeared with two batteries.

"These are brand new," she said. "What are you going to do with them?"

I smiled craftily. "This box is a radical new camera I invented. I intend to try it out later in the day."

I waited until she was gone. Then I sat up and

managed to hobble to a chair in a clear space in the room.

I sat down and set the dials of my time machine to 1979 and the finder rheostat to my laboratory. I pushed the red starter button.

Again there was that roaring in my ears and my consciousness whirled off into total blackness.

I opened my eyes.

I was back in my laboratory and I found Hugo staring at me, open-mouthed.

I could hardly blame him. I had departed hale and hearty and now I returned battered, bruised, and bandaged.

Hugo managed to pull himself together. "Did you save the *Titanic*, sir?"

I cleared my throat. "It's a long story, Hugo. I'll tell you about it some other time."

Somehow Hugo looked just slightly different. I glanced at the clock. It was nearly two. "So I was gone three hours?"

"No, sir," Hugo said.

I was a bit puzzled. "No, sir, what?"

"No, sir, you weren't gone three hours. You were gone four months."

I blinked. Now I could see what was different about Hugo. That thin blond mustache. He couldn't have grown that in just three hours.

I closed my eyes. Those damn flashlight batteries. Or was it the flashlight batteries, after all? I was aghast, "Four months?"

Hugo nodded. "Four months."

I would have sat down, except that I was already sitting. I had been missing four months? What had happened in that time? I suppose my wife had gone to the authorities and reported me missing.

"Your disappearance was quite a mystery," Hugo said. "Except to me, of course. But since you had sworn me to secrecy, I could tell no one what had actually happened. Though I was tempted to tell Miss Mullins."

"Miss Mullins?"

"Yes, sir. She took your disappearance especially hard. Miss Mullins has become quite pale and melancholy. I understand that at the end of this semester she is resigning to enter a nunnery."

A nunnery? Just because I disappeared? I was quite touched. Poor girl. I must set that straight immediately.

I sighed. "And my wife? I suppose she missed me too?"

Hugo looked away. "Actually I don't think so, sir."

I frowned, staring at him. "Are you trying to

tell me that my own wife did not even miss me?"

"I have reason to believe not, sir. In the light of what happened."

"What happened?"

"She is dead, sir. She died two weeks ago when the airplane crashed into the motel."

"What the devil was Beatrice doing on an airplane? She's deathly afraid of flying."

"She wasn't on the airplane, sir. She was in the motel. A small airplane had just taken off from the airport when something went wrong and it crashed into the motel."

I thought that over. "What was Beatrice doing in a motel? She hates motels."

Hugo shifted a bit uneasily. "Professor Rawlins was killed in the same crash."

"He was the pilot of the airplane?"

"No, sir. He was in the motel too. As a matter of fact, he and your wife were killed in the same room. It was slightly after two in the morning. They were probably asleep and did not suffer."

I was dumbfounded. Professor Rawlins? From our psychology department? What in the world would a psychologist see in Beatrice, except as a case history, of course.

Hugo seemed to look at the ceiling. "However all of that can be undone."

I was still slightly stunned. "Undone?"

"Yes, sir. With your time machine. You can simply return to the date you left here, sir, and all that has happened in the last four months will never have occurred at all."

I rubbed my neck. Of course. Undone. Beatrice would still be alive. And waiting for me to explain what had happened to that damn cat Albert. I shuddered at the prospect.

"Hugo," I said finally, "I have come to a moral decision. What God has wrought, mere man must not unwrought. There are some things in this universe that man had better leave alone and fooling around with time is one of them."

I placed the time machine on one of the laboratory tables and then pried a hand fire extinguisher from its bracket on the wall. I smashed down on the machine—once, twice, six times until I was certain that it was thoroughly and hopelessly destroyed.

Then I turned to Hugo. "Now go to Miss Mullins and gently inform her that I have returned."

Hugo smiled. "Yes, sir." He paused at the door. "Personally I am quite pleased with your decision, sir. I'm really quite fond of this mustache and hate to have to go back four months and start it all over again."

